

Luke 24:36b-48

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

You Are Witnesses - April 18, 2021

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What does it mean to have an encounter with God? You might reply, "I don't know, I've never met him." Or you might say, "I have met God, and the experience was not at all what I thought it would be like. Or you might say, "Yes, I've met God, and I was absolutely terrified.

If you said the last one, that you were terrified, you are certainly in good company. Today's scripture records an encounter the risen Christ had with his disciples and makes it very clear that they were frightened — totally scared. Yes, eventually they got over their fear and were overjoyed to see their Lord alive again. But at first, they were so stunned that Jesus had to ask them to not be afraid.

Yet it seems even Jesus was confused about his disciples' fear. He asked them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" I expect there must have been a note of disappointment in Jesus' voice. Hadn't he been preparing his followers for this exact moment? Didn't he remind the disciples time and again that their mission and ministry were all leading to one conclusion: Jesus' death and resurrection? Why should they have been surprised? I mean, Jesus had never mislead them or deceived them. Everything he told them turned out to be true. He had performed miracles in their presence, taught them in ways they had never heard, and changed the lives of so many people, regardless of their health, race, nationality, gender, or anything else.

Of course, it's one thing to preach, teach, and perform hard-to-explain signs in front of people, it's quite another to do so after being clearly and utterly dead. They could not wrap their minds around what was happening to them. Dead was dead and dead was final.

But in all fairness, I'm not so sure we could do better. The point of Jesus' mission was to demonstrate to us that when we follow God's Law and live life according to God's plan and purpose for us, our lives are profoundly changed for the better. We become new. We live life differently. Our priorities change dramatically. Our minds and attitudes will never be the same.

But are they changed? Here it is, right in the scripture. The disciples doubted. Standing right in front of them was Jesus. Solid, wounded, and asking for some food to prove that he was really there. And still they doubted. Still they were frightened. Just as, I believe, we would be.

Isn't that a paradox? How could the disciples have any doubts with Jesus standing right in front of them? How could they have any fear?

Here's the problem: if Jesus really was alive, that meant that their entire world-view was wrong! Everything they assumed about how life worked no longer made sense. Because in Jesus' resurrection, death is defeated and forgiveness and love are the new reality.

Every week, we pray a Prayer of Confession. We bow before God and tell God, ourselves, and each other that we have sinned. We have not been the people God created us to be. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have hurt people — sometimes intentionally, sometimes accidentally, sometimes by refusing to help others when we could have been more helpful.

But the point of the Prayer of Confession followed by the Kyrie, the "Lord Have Mercy" is that we get to hear the amazing words, the most wonderful words in the world, "We Are Forgiven."

Friends, this is what it's all about! This is what it means to be a Christian! This is why we should be the happiest, most grateful people in the universe! Those three awesome words, "We are forgiven."

What does forgiveness really mean? Well, isn't forgiveness a kind of resurrection? At the same time, isn't resurrection a kind of forgiveness? Let us be clear: God did not have to raise Jesus from the dead. By all rights, God should not have done anything for an ungrateful humanity after we crucified God's Son. God should have left Jesus in the grave. God should have turned his back on us and walked away from us because of what we did — and continue to do — to Jesus.

All Jesus did was to preach and show the endless love of God by everything he said and did. He tried over and over again to show that all of us are special and precious in God's sight and that we should consider each other special and precious in each other's sight.

Perhaps, friends, perhaps the fundamental problem is that we don't really think of ourselves as needing to be forgiven. We're just like Norman Greenbaum singing "Spirit in the Sky," "I'm not a sinner, I never sin." Yeah, if that's what we think about ourselves, then confession is unnecessary and forgiveness is therefore meaningless. If the forgiveness of God in Jesus Christ is meaningless, then the resurrection of Jesus is meaningless. All of it is just empty words.

Now I agree, thinking about ourselves basically as sinners is a downer. We all think of ourselves as essentially OK people. Sure we make a mistake here and there, but mostly we're all right. Very few people like asking for help. We hate admitting we need anything or admitting we've made a mistake. Asking forgiveness is hard, so it's much easier to just assume we don't need to be forgiven for anything and consequently don't really need God to restore our lives and rebuild our relationship with ourselves and each other.

If, therefore, the forgiveness of God doesn't matter then the gift of Jesus' resurrection also doesn't matter. Easter, instead of being for us the life-changing world-remaking event it should be, is just another ho-hum holiday: an excuse to get a giant ham at ShopRite.

But what if we could be like those disciples: frightened, happy, and amazed all at the same time? Frightened because they had never experienced a dead man returning to life. Happy, because they had their friend and teacher back. Amazed, because if Jesus were indeed alive again, then new life and restoration was possible for anybody and everybody. Unheard of! Absurd!

Our personal challenge, our challenge as a church is clear. Pastor David Lose puts it this way: I would like to ask people how we might live differently if acted like God's promises were true. So often, I think, these promises are so familiar to us that we hold them far back in our head but don't actually think about them and so don't act as if they are true. But if it's true that God raised Jesus from the dead... If it's true that God promises to renew the whole creation and grant us new life... If it's true that nothing – nothing we've done or has been done to us – can separate us from the love of God... If it's true that God will not turn God's back on any of us but always reaches out to us in grace, mercy, and forgiveness... If any of this – let alone all of this – is true, then how might we live our lives this week differently? How might this faith – not knowledge, but trusting, courageous faith – change how we look at our relationships, and our politics, and our work, and our resources, and our future?

Here is the question we have to struggle with: is the good news of God's love, God's forgiveness, literally embodied in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus really good news? Not nice news. Not Snapple-Lid facts news. Not even the news you hear at 6:00 on TV. Is the good news of Jesus, the gospel, actually something that is in truth the best, most amazing news you can possibly imagine? Because, frankly, it should be. If the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not, in our minds, the greatest thing that has ever happened in the history of humanity, I don't know what is! And if indeed the Easter event is the greatest thing that has ever happened, we as Christians should be not just happy, but utterly ecstatic about having the opportunity to witness to Jesus' resurrection and desperately wanting to share the good news with the world using whatever gifts and talents God has given us!

Karoline Lewis does point out that for most of us, Life, here and now, is very hard to see. In the end, being resurrection people takes some effort, in fact, a lot of effort. And some weeks will demand more effort than others. Jesus knows this reality, our reality. And knows that we need a reminder. In fact, we probably need a lot of them, daily perhaps. Notice the tense of Jesus'

assertion — not “you were,” not “you will be,” but “you are.” I have a feeling Jesus takes that seriously. You are witnesses, here and now, in this moment. In this life. In your daily life. For the sake of life. Jesus reminds us of who we really are — resurrection people, resurrection witnesses.

This, friends, is our calling! This, friends, is our purpose! This is the good news that should want to make you get up in the morning! We are here to proclaim with every ounce of our being that God raised Jesus from the dead so that we can have new life! Each of us has special talents that will make us good witnesses, all we have to do is find and nurture them! But when we dare to live our lives in faith, faith that resurrection and forgiveness are God’s reality, then the world is turned upside down!

Suddenly, we are no longer prisoners of the past! Suddenly, the “unimaginable impossible” becomes the very real possible! Suddenly, our dead, defeated, beaten-down souls can live again and not just get-by again, but live better than ever before.

Hear the good news! Because of Jesus, we can all start again, restored and loved! Now, now more than ever, doesn’t this totally messed up world need to hear this good news? Now, now more than ever, don’t we need to hear this good news? Now, now more than ever, don’t our friends and families need to hear this good news?

Yes, yes, of course we do! For so, so, long we have been mired in the filthy, gloomy bog of believing nothing will change and nothing will ever get better. But in Jesus, we have the faith that death is defeated and life reigns forever. Isn’t this better than any restaurant, any TV show, any Vacation Spot we might recommend? If we can easily recommend such mundane things to our friends and families, can we, do we, dare to share the best news of all, the best news about Jesus with the world?

We do not witness alone, as the first resurrection witness tells us, We do not witness alone, as we sit amongst a community of fellow believers. In Jesus Christ, we have the remarkable power to change the world! Look what happened, Jesus took a small group of frightened, confused disciples and empowered them to create a movement which 2000 years later is still challenging the world.

If Jesus can do that, back then, He can certainly do that with us right now. Do not be afraid, just trust and have faith. Jesus is Alive. Jesus is Lord. Arise, arise Collingswood Presbyterian Church and follow!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.